Cytomegalovirus (CMV): Risk for the Transplant Patient

Cytomegalovirus is part of the herpes virus family. It is usually harmless to people with healthy immune systems. After the transplant, you will be on several drugs to prevent rejection of your new organ. These drugs suppress your immune system so you may be at higher risk for CMV infection.

How do I know if I have CMV?

- Blood is drawn during your transplant work up to check for CMV in your system. A careful screening also is done to check for this virus in the donor. Even if you have never been exposed to CMV, the person who donated your organ may have been exposed. Knowing if one or both of you have been exposed helps the transplant team take care of you after the transplant.

- Most people with strong immune systems do not know that they have been exposed to CMV. CMV may remain dormant in your body for life but can reactivate at any time when your immune system is weak or suppressed.

- CMV is spread by close contact with body fluids. Body fluids are urine, saliva, blood, tears, and sexual fluids.
Signs of CMV infection

CMV can infect any organ. Some signs of CMV infection include:

- Fever greater than 101 degrees F (38 degrees C)
- Muscle weakness
- Fatigue
- Headache, confusion, seizure
- Arthritis pain in joints
- Blurry or loss of vision in one eye
- Shortness of breath
- Blood in stool, abdominal discomfort, nausea and vomiting

How is CMV diagnosed?

Sample of blood, urine and sputum may be cultured to see if the CMV virus is active. Other blood tests also may be done. In some cases, a biopsy of the infected organ is done. This means a sample of tissue is removed from the organ for testing.

Prevention and Treatment

If blood tests show that you have CMV before your transplant, antiviral medicines are given. Additional tests may be used to check your condition.

Because this virus lays dormant in your body, it is possible that you may become infected at any time during your life after transplant. Even if you show no sign of infection, you may be given antiviral medicines after transplant to reduce your risk of infection.

Not every transplant patient develops CMV. However, an infection can be very serious. Antiviral medicines may be given to prevent the spread of infection, but do not cure it. You need to contact your transplant team right away when you are not feeling well.

Talk to your doctor or others on your health care team if you have questions. You may request more written information from the Library for Health Information at (614) 293-3707 or email: health-info@osu.edu.